

The International Year of the Disabled

Lucid views of the needs and concerns of the disabled

The International Year of the Disabled has made us more aware of the needs and concerns of the disabled, as well as the valuable contributions which they can make in society. It has shown us that they are a very real part of our society, are visible, and cannot be ignored by being locked up in institutions.

The International Year of the Disabled has shown disabled persons themselves that people really are concerned about them, and are striving towards a better understanding of what it means to be handicapped.

The Year has encouraged the disabled to live their lives with

dignity, to use their talents to pursue their goals without the fear of being singled out as being different, or deemed incapable.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the disabled person is to accept himself for what he is, and to integrate himself into the mainstream of a dominantly "normal" society - a society in which people take for granted the everyday physical tasks and talents which the human body performs: Walking, running, jumping, talking, hearing, seeing, touching, writing, tying a shoe or buttoning a shirt. The things done automatically, without thinking. But what of disabled people who cannot perform such tasks? What

do they see? They see themselves as different. Some may even see themselves as lesser human beings, unequal, weak and vulnerable.

Most disabled people are very independent and determined, sometimes even to the point of stubbornness. They want to show that they can fit into society, that they are just as capable of doing things like everyone else, but they must work harder to achieve them.

Things done unconsciously by most people may be unimaginable to a disabled person.

What would it be like to spend a lifetime in a wheelchair, unable to walk, unable to drive a

car, unable to go places because there are no ramps?

What would it be like to spend a life in darkness, never seeing a blue sky, never seeing the brilliant colours of autumn, never knowing what you looked like.

What would it be like to go through life never hearing voices, music, laughter, crying, the sound of a train late at night or the distant roll of thunder.

How many of us have ever thought of the complexities involved in taking a single step, and how much more complex it must be for a person who cannot or has difficulty walking? To imagine the movement, to think about and analyze it, to see the action in your brain and not be able to life your foot; to lift your foot up and hope your leg is not seized by a muscle spasm; to hope your foot lands squarely on the pavement without your ankle turning in or out, causing you to fall.

How many of us have had to concentrate on controlling the involuntary movements of a gnarled hand just long enough to lift a cup to our mouth without spilling it?

Can we ever imagine what it must be like to be stared at, and to feel so nervous and self-conscious that our muscles tighten up and

we look worse than we usually are? Probably not. But what we can do is change attitudes.

Attitudinal barriers can often be more crippling than a disability itself. It is not that difficult, and most of it is plain common sense. Nobody likes to be stared at. We must learn to stop gawking with gaping mouths and bulging eyes.

We must overcome the myth that all disabled people live in constant pain and suffering. What may appear to be awkward or uncomfortable to us is natural to them; that's the way they are, the way they always have been. And while it is common courtesy to help somebody in need, we must not become overprotective or over-sympathetic. Disabled people don't need pity. They need encouragement. They need to feel a part of society, to see themselves as equals in society. This is probably what a disabled person wants more than anything else - to be treated as an individual human being rather than a "disabled person." Positive attitudes yield positive results.

Rather than setting boundaries for the disabled and deciding what they can or cannot do, we must give them wings.

Gregory Wurzer

Slaying the dragon

I was born December 20, 1953, in what was, at the time, the windy little prairie town of Lethbridge, Alberta. My earliest memories take me back to what were to become dominant symbols in helping me survive as a dyslexic child.

When I was four or five years old, I had a brother who was rendered crippled by multiple sclerosis since birth. Before he died, I would spend hours looking into my brother's eyes and, already having a vivid imagination, I believed I saw a glowing light within him. To ease the apprehension I had concerning my brother's fate, I was sent for a while, to my grandfather who lived near Edmonton.

My grandfather was a man of wisdom, a scholar with a Doctorate in Philosophy. Through him, I discovered a world that was rich with new and wonderful things to learn.

I remember drawing a picture of a machine with large tentacles attached to its head, and when asked by my grandfather what the machine did, I replied by saying that this machine feeds the head with knowledge. He called it the perfect machine and advised me to continue learning as much as I could.

When I started school, however, the wondrous world of learning changed to a wicked world of walls. I had a learning disorder which resulted in my becoming confused and disoriented. Learning problems involving sequences were difficult to master and even simple arithmetic problems seemed impossible to do.

Practically every day of my second grade was met with physical punishment from the teacher and the days seemed like eternity until, finally, the year ended in my having to repeat the grade. My next second grade provided relief from the troubled past since the new teacher was gentle and understanding but the years that followed brought more darkness.

In the fifth grade, I was able to endure physical punishment but the anguish and humiliation I underwent when at the blackboard brought new meaning to the 'black' in 'blackboard'. For me, words and numbers on the blackboard were always in the wrong sequence and certain letters would end up being backwards. This was responded to with punishment or with the 'drain-brain' routine. The teacher would write the word 'brain' on the board and would ask me what the word said, then she would erase the letter 'b' and replace it with the letter 'd'. With that the teacher would ask me what the new word said, I became very dizzy and I felt my whole body

tremble as I forced the answers from my mouth. The teacher would complete the exercise by saying that it was obvious that God gave me a drain instead of a brain. The class always found this amusing and eventually I became a class clown.

Towards the end of the fifth grade, it was thought that my intelligence was not high enough to enable me to enter the next grade so I was sent to a government building where I was given intelligence tests and psychological tests. After it was determined that I had a high intelligence and that I was psychologically sound, I was permitted to continue the next grades.

In trying to cope with the pain of primary school, I sought refuge in my imagination. Struggling to organize my thoughts, I attempted to associate concepts, words and ideas with visual imagery or symbols. The most important symbols were the symbols of hope which sustained me through the worst of times.

During the winter, the symbol of hope would be the ripples of reflected light on the school canopy, which I called 'lake of light'.

In the spring, it would be a crushed leaf rubbed in the palm of my hand. But when I was in my sixth grade, my grandfather died and his death symbolized the death of hope.

My grades continued to suffer and the symbols seemed ritualistic and meaningless.

Consumed with despair, while I was walking home from school one day, I experienced a fantasy that became a new and literally shining symbol of hope. A dragon appeared before me and it said that it would be called the 'Beast', claiming it would rule the world. Then, there came something that seemed like an old friend from the long lost past. It was the light, the same light I saw in my brother. The light said "I am the Lord your God" and the light formed a sword saying that with this sword I shall slay the Beast. With this I was armed with renewed hope and energy. The problems I faced resulting from my dyslexia (the dragon) were destined to fall and faith and determination (the sword) would conquer.

As I became older, symbols were replaced by faith in Christ and in people who care. I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Lethbridge in 1977. Although I have not been able to establish myself career wise due to my disability, it seems that with the support I am getting from understanding individuals, full independence is not far away.

Nick S. III

the Wheelchair

The day of the possible suggestion of 6 months in a wheelchair to try to gain physical strength so my body could try to heal itself.

IF -
50% of my life must be
Lived in a chair on wheels
To try to conserve some strength
That I need to keep my mind...

But how do I cut back
On the things I want to do,
In that chair on wheels
There are many things I can't
reach.

Yet, maybe with a visible clue
People will begin to understand
The fight I've had these many
years
To keep myself above despair.

YES -
I could then go and dance
And play with the basketball,
I'd have people to touch
And hold me as I'm lifted about.

But does one have to be
In a chair on wheels
Before, they can be touched and
held
A thing which is vital to us all?

So for me there could be
Some benefits to be had
Of giving my painful body rest
At the expense of being called
"odd".

Why fight against the odds,
Of the pain, the mental turmoil,
When, in the end, you are cast
aside
By society, family and friends?

BUT -
Yet I know the inner me
Will buck and kick against the
odds
And rise to turn the problem large
Into a golden lining in disguise.

Marion Dowler

Touching

"Touching" - from my jottings,
March 5/80

Why could they not see
my need?
Why could I not say,
touch me?
Was it fear of my tears,
the exposure
Of inner, pent up feelings
needing to be expressed -
Or was it the mask
I feared to lose,
The one which was always cool?

Marion Dowler

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"I have clinched and closed with the naked North, I have learned to defy and defend; Shoulder to shoulder we have fought it out - yet the wild must win in the end."

Robert Service

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